Joseph Nigg

Transformations of the Phoenix: from the Church Fathers to the Bestiaries

UDK/UDC: 246.6:244
291.23
7.042.046.1/.2:246.6

Joseph Nigg
Denver, Colorado, USA
joe@josephnigg.com

Among all the animals the early and medieval Christians selected to teach religious lessons, the mythical phoenix bears the greatest burden as a symbol of resurrection, the foundation of Christian doctrine. This paper summarizes how the phoenix figure, based in ancient Egypt and developed in Greece and Rome, came to be adopted by the early Church and how it transformed in Christian literature and art from the Church Fathers to the bestiaries of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Such an overview requires consideration of how the Early Christian phoenix derived from contradictory classical models and how those discrepancies between words and images were combined in medieval bestiaries.

Key words: Phoenix, Clement, resurrection, *Physiologus*, Resurrection of Christ, Tertullian, Ambrose, Isidore, Early Christian art, bestiaries, illuminations

In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton refers to the mythical phoenix as having "ages of lives." The figure's mutations in literature and art from ancient times to the present confirm the metaphorical truth of that assessment. Overlapping the classical period, the second great cultural "age" of the phoenix extends from the rise of Christianity through the flourishing of the medieval Church. The transformations of the Christian phoenix over the course of more than a millennium begin with writings that establish the bird's symbolic religious role and continue independently with iconography derived from a different classical model; by the bestiaries of the High Middle Ages, phoenix images are adapted to illustrate compilations of traditional Christian texts. This age within the phoenix's long history is characterized by the disconnected development of the bird of resurrection. The protean figure's religious allegory will eventually diminish while its iconography will evolve to the present day.

Early Christian Literary Traditions

Classical lore of the death and rebirth of the phoenix[1] was widespread when St. Clement of Rome recognized the pattern of Christian resurrection in the tale. In his first *Letter to the Corinthians*[2] (c. A.D. 96), Clement I, the third successor of Peter as Bishop of Rome, declares: "There is a bird which is called the phoenix." With these credulous words he ushers the pagan bird of immortality into the resurrection doctrine of the young Christian Church. Clement's phoenix passage is just as seminal for medieval belief as Herodotus's fifth-century B.C account (*History*, 2.73) was for the Greco-Roman literary development of the bird. Beginning with Clement, the Christian phoenix transforms concurrently with both classical and Hebraic phoenix lore.

Clement's letter chastises the laity of Corinth for their ejection of clergy – a rare papal rebuke of another Christian community. Among his reiterations of Christ's teachings are his proofs of resurrection of the flesh, climaxing with the death and rebirth of the Arabian bird. The phoenix passage is an amalgam of classical sources, deriving from a body of Western traditions that begin with the eighth-century B.C. riddle of longevity attributed

to Hesiod (*Precepts of Chiron*, 3). As in the story that Roman authors developed and varied from Herodotus, Clement's long-lived bird bears the remains of its parent from Arabia to Heliopolis every five hundred years. Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, 15.491-407), Mela (*Situation of the World*, 3.8), and Pliny's Manilius (*Natural History*, 10.2), too, write that the bird flies to a sacred destination. Clement's phoenix, like that of Mela and Pliny, is the only one of its kind, and its nest of spices has antecedents in Ovid, Mela, and Manilius. Those authorities, unlike Herodotus, mention the bird's death, and Manilius prefigures the worm from which the new bird is born in the pope's account. Clement, though, does not repeat any physical description of the bird. He adds the role of moisture in the bird's rebirth and the priests' consultation of their records of phoenix appearances. Finally, his credulity is at odds with the skepticism of both Herodotus and Pliny.

It was probably within the next century that the *Physiologus*[3] introduces the second major Christian version of the phoenix fable. Many of the Church Fathers are associated with the *Physiologus,* either citing it in their sermons and writings or even being credited with authorship of the work.[4] The phoenix was one of about fifty animals in the oldest extant Greek manuscript and was retained in nearly every Latin and vernacular recension thereafter. Aside from the general pattern of the bird's death and rebirth, the *Physiologus* entry differs substantially from Clement's version. Whereas Clement emphasizes the resurrection of the faithful and often quotes from the Old Testament, the *Physiologus* alludes to Christ's Resurrection in His own words from John 10:18: "I have the power to lay down my life, and I have the power to take it again." Like Clement's letter, the *Physiologus* affirms the existence of the bird, but it is one of the earliest writings to place the abode of the phoenix in India.[5] Also, while its lifespan is the standard duration, this phoenix has a subordinate destination, and instead of carrying the ashes of its parent to the altar, it bears the fragrance of spices in its wings and offers itself in Christ-like sacrifice. The bird does not decompose, but for one of the earliest times in phoenix literature, immolates itself.[6] Here, too, as in Clement and others, a worm emerges from the ashes and grows wings, but – for the first time in phoenix writings – is reborn in three days, enacting Christ's Passion and Resurrection. Only versions of the *Physiologus* and works influenced by them identify the bird with Christ and His Resurrection, including its rebirth in three days.[7] Also, the bird's death in fire is distinctly different from the Clementine version.

Aside from the skepticism of Origen (*Contra Celsum,* 4.98) and Augustine (*De anima et eius origine,* 4.21. 33), most of the Church Fathers accept the actuality of the phenomenal phoenix, and most of their writings derive from either one or both of the Christian literary traditions outlined above. The most influential of these writings on later bestiary texts are by Ambrose and Isidore.[8] In both a funeral sermon (c. 378)[9] and his *Hexameron* (c. 387),[10] Ambrose refers to the nest of the decomposing bird as a "casket" and adds the Virgilian "oarage of its wings" to his description of the new bird's flight. The *Hexameron* homily ends with an elaborate metaphor of faith as a casket that believers need to fill with the sweet aroma of deeds, as Paul did with his martyrdom. The last of the Fathers of the Western Church, Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636), both varies and extends the traditions of the Christian phoenix. In his secular *Etymologies,*[11] his dependence on classical authors, his classification of plants and animals, and his origins of their names provide the transition from the *Physiologus* to the expanded bestiaries. His brief, objective phoenix segment contains no religious moral. The bird of Arabia is named for its purple *(phoeniceus)* plumage or its uniqueness, the latter leading Arabs to call a singular person a *phoenix*. This innovative metaphor prefigures the bird's transformation into a Renaissance symbol of human perfection. After five hundred years or more, the aged bird builds itself a pyre from spices and twigs, and facing the rays of the sun, sets the nest aflame with the fanning of its wings, and rises again from its own ashes. While the element of fire derives from the *Physiologus,* Isidore initiates the manner of its combustion as the phoenix looks at the sun.[12]

The Phoenix in Early Christian Art

Wanting to portray the bird of resurrection already established in patristic writings, Early Christian artists, too, derive their phoenix from the Roman model. Roman artists, though, had bypassed classical verbal descriptions of the bird to take their inspiration from hieroglyphic and painted portrayals of the heron-like Egyptian *benu,* the sacred bird of Heliopolis[13] (fig. 1). That choice of pictorial prototype reflects the conflicting origins of the Western phoenix. Heliopolis was the site of Herodotus's account, but he said that the red and gold bird he had seen in pictures was "almost exactly that of the eagle" in make and size. Nor did the story that he said the priests told him match that of the immortal Egyptian sunbird, a manifestation of the gods and guide of souls through the underworld. There is no extant phoenix bird in Greek art.[14] It was a variation of the *benu,* from occupied Egypt, that appeared intermittently on the reverse of imperial coins from the A.D. 118 currency of Hadrian (fig. 2) and through the dynasty of Constantine the Great to the reign of Valentinian II, in the final stages of the empire.[15] A solar symbol of renewal and immortality of Rome, the imperial phoenix is a long-legged bird with a radiate nimbus. With the exception of Isidore's mention of the bird's color, the writings of the Church Fathers contained virtually no physical description of the phoenix. Early Christian artists thus adapt the Roman image to express their religious belief. This Christian phoenix is represented in all the major stages of Early Christian iconography, from catacomb frescoes to funerary sculpture and mosaics in Christian churches.[16]

In an early third-century fragment from the Catacomb of Priscilla, a phoenix haloed with a radiate nimbus emerges from flames,[17] strongly suggesting the literary influence of the *Physiologus* tradition. The aureole notwithstanding, this is no longer the Roman bird heralding a new era of an eternal empire. This phoenix, dying in the fire of self-sacrifice and martyrdom, represents persecution and the resurrection to come. Among many representations of the nimbed and long-legged bird, one such figure stands in full profile amid stylized vertical flames in a mosaic *tondo* from the fourth-century Italian basilica of Aquileia.[18] Fire is, if anything only implied in what is perhaps the most impressive of Early Christian phoenixes: a *tondo* fragment from the apsidal mosaic in Rome's fourth-century Old St. Peter's[19] (fig. 3). Although its legs are not as elongated as those of similar figures, its multi-rayed halo identifies the bird as a phoenix. Whether intended or not, the red stones beneath its feet - and perhaps even the red outline of its body - suggest its death and triumphant rebirth.[20]

A different phoenix motif, the resurrected bird perching in a date palm in the Heavenly Kingdom, is widespread in coffin sculpture as well as in apsidal mosaics. Given their Greek homonymy, the bird of renewal and the ever fruitful and green palm tree had been closely linked from the bird's beginning.[21] A conventional Early Christian tableau presents the aureoled phoenix in a palm to the right (the viewer's left) of the risen Christ, saints, and apostles. Variations of this scene, classified as *Traditio legis,*[22] are notably depicted in carvings on sarcophagi from the Vatican cemetery, Arles, and Verona,[23] and apsidal mosaics in the Roman churches of SS. Cosma e Damiano (figs. 4a and 4b), St. Prassede, and St. Cecilia.[24]

The phoenix figures of the bestiaries are different birds altogether.

The Bestiary Phoenix

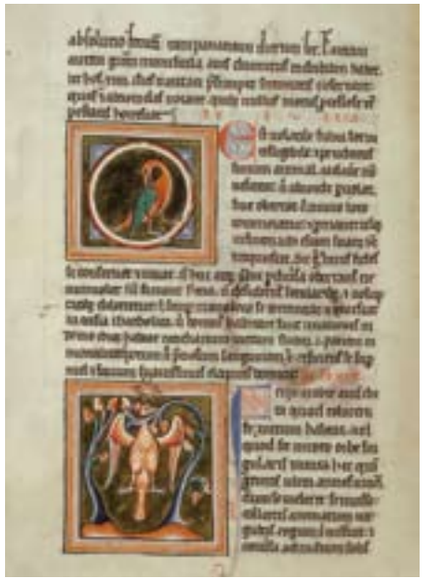
Separated by centuries and iconoclastic movements against Byzantine religious images, the phoenix of Early Christian literature and art is, over time, transformed into the phoenix of the bestiaries. The popular book of beasts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries grows out of versions of the Latin *Physiologus.*[25] Isidore of Seville's etymologies of animal names and descriptions of additional beasts from classical writings almost triples the entries of the earlier book, and illuminations enhancing the texts make the religious lessons accessible to illiterate laity.

1. The hieroglyphic Egyptian *benu,* model for the Roman phoenix image (Budge)

2. The reverse of an Aureus of Hadrian, A.D. 118 (British Museum. BMC Hadrian 48). Roman model for the Early Christian phoenix image. (© The Trustees of the British Museum).

3. Fragment of apsidal mosaic of Old St. Peter's, Rome, 4th c. (Photo: akg-images/Electa)

4a. Apsidal mosaic of SS. Cosma e Damiano, Rome, 6th c., and detail 4b. (Photos: Sacred Destinations)



5. The 12th c. Ashmole Bestiary (MS Ashmole 1511), f. 67v. The position of the phoenix gathering spices for its nest evokes Christ on the Cross. (The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford)

6. The 12th c. Ashmole Bestiary (MS Ashmole 1511), f. 68. Immolation of the phoenix. (The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford)

4b. The Early Christian phoenix with radiate nimbus is in the palm tree to the right of Christ

City of Phoenix

8. Logo of the City of Phoenix, Arizona (Reproduced with permission)

A standard *Physiologus* entry, the phoenix appears in the texts and art of nearly all bestiaries. Copied or adapted from one manuscript to another, phoenix texts are pastiches of the writings of authorities. Texts thus derived primarily from different phoenix traditions established by the Church Fathers and the *Physiologus,* seemingly without scribes' concerns for inconsistencies between sources. Representations of the phoenix in bestiary art, from ink drawings to luxurious illuminations, also have much in common with each other. The bestiary phoenix does not bear the aureole of the Early Christian figure, nor does it typically have the long legs common among its progenitors. It is portrayed generically or with characteristics of particular species, especially the eagle,[26] with which Herodotus compared the phoenix. Although the bird is sometimes presented in a single bestiary portrait or in a tableau with one or more priests, pictures of the bird frequently accompany texts in pairs, occasionally in a single narrative,[27] but most often in separate images of the bird gathering spices and then immolating itself. In any case, the iconography evokes the sacrifice and Resurrection of Christ.[28]

The "Fenix" entry in the twelfth-century Cambridge University Library MS Ii.4.26[29] is typical. The text is a compilation of unattributed writings found in many other bestiaries: Isidore's *Etymologies,* the *Physiologus,* and Ambrose's *Hexameron.*[30] The entry opens with Isidore's etymology and description of the bird's fiery death, to which the Cambridge bestiarist surprisingly appends: "Then verily, on the ninth day afterward, it rises from its own ashes!" Assumed to be a copyist's error rather than some arcane tradition, the "ninth day" detail, at odds with the three-day rebirth in *Physiologus,* appears in multiple bestiary texts.[31] The scribe then paraphrases the conclusion of the *Physiologus* entry, which compares Christ to the phoenix, and adds: "who offered himself on the altar of the cross to suffer for us and on the third day rise again," apparently unaware of the different rebirth durations in his text. At this point, the entry borrows from its third principal source, Ambrose's *Hexameron.* Contradicting Isidore's earlier statement that the phoenix dies in fire, the Cambridge scribe paraphrases Ambrose's version of the bird's death, from Clement, that it succumbs to old age in its nest and that from "the liquid of its body a worm now emerges." The worm then grows into a phoenix, which assumes the unmistakable Ambrosian "oarage of its wings" metaphor. The *Hexameron* borrowings continue to the end of the entry, through the extended casket imagery to the closing reference to Paul's martyrdom. Throughout this latter half of the text, emphasis is upon the resurrection of the faithful, as in Clement, not the Resurrection of Christ, as in the *Physiologus.*

The narrative pictures that accompany the Cambridge Bestiary's phoenix text comprise the typical bestiary pairing of the bird's gathering of spices and its expiring in a flaming nest. Although the entry presents two versions of the phoenix's death, the bestiary artist, like most others illustrating the bird's demise, includes fire. Both uncolored Cambridge phoenix drawings evolve into rich illuminations of MS Harley 4751.[32]

As in other manuscripts of this kind, the phoenix chapter in the elaborately illuminated Aberdeen Bestiary[33] generally follows the standard Isidore/*Physiologus*/Ambrose source formula, with the addition of material from Hugh of Fouilloy's *Aviarium.*[34] It retains the "ninth day" reference and indicates the cobbled nature of the next by mentioning the bird's Arabian home three times, from different sources. After paraphrasing the Ambrose passage (without "the oarage of its wings") and its account of the aged bird's decomposition in the nest, the bestiarist contradictorily ends with Hugh's "the phoenix is consumed by fire," from the *Physiologus* tradition and the resurrection of the faithful, not of Christ, from the Clementine tradition.

Phoenix miniatures of MS Ashmole 1511 are iconographically similar to those of the Aberdeen Bestiary's illuminations. The first of the pair of images corresponds to conventional representations of the phoenix gathering aromas for its wings and spices for its nest, but the elongated bird with outspread wings, vertically suspended between stylized branches, can also be regarded allegorically as Christ on the cross[35] (fig. 5). Such an emphasis upon His sacrifice and subsequent Resurrection follows the *Physiologus* tradition. In the second of the pair, the phoenix faces the rising sun and fans the flames of its nest with its wings, as described in Isidore, again evoking the *Physiologus* (fig. 6). The bowl-like nest, similar to those in the Cambridge Bestiary, Aberdeen Bestiary, and Harley 4751, suggests a baptismal font.[36] The sun above the bird's head in both Ashmole pictures could suggest

a halo[37] reminiscent of the rayed nimbus of Early Christian and Roman phoenixes.

Following its flourishing and its influence on sculpture and stained glass, the medieval bestiary gradually loses its following, although manuscripts are copied into at least the fifteenth century. The power of the medieval Church and its allegories is beginning to fade when Petrarch evokes the bird in his Laura poems, establishing Isidore's paragon metaphor that becomes the preeminent phoenix symbolism throughout the Renaissance. However, the common bestiary image of the eagle-like phoenix in a nest of fire is adapted in Renaissance heraldry (fig. 7), alchemy, printers' marks and emblem books, and eventually in modern logos and design (fig. 8), which usually symbolize renewal following destruction. The well-known emblem of twentieth-century novelist D.H. Lawrence (fig. 9) is, in fact, derived from an illumination in the Ashmole Bestiary.[38]

7. Heraldic crest. The phoenix as demi-eagle issuant from flames (Fairbairn)

9. Emblem of novelist D.H. Lawrence, derived from the Ashmole Bestiary (Phoenix illustration from *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence* by D.H. Lawrence, introduction by Aldous Huxley, copyright 1932 by the Estate of D.H. Lawrence. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Group USA Inc.)

1 For discussions of phoenix traditions, see especially: R. VAN DEN BROEK, *The Myth of the Phoenix: According to Classical and Early Christian Traditions*, Leiden, 1972; *The D.H. Lawrence Review,* Phoenix, n. 5, Fayetteville, Ark., Fall 1972; *The Old English Elene, Phoenix and Physiologus*, ed. and trans A. COOK, Yale University Press, 1919, p. xxxviii-li; M. FITZPATRICK, *Lactani De Ave Phoenice: With Introduction, Text, Translation, and Commentary*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1933, pp. 16-30; M. McDONALD, *Phoenix Redivivus*, in: The Phoenix, 14, Toronto, 1960, pp. 188-195; and M. NIEHOFF, *The Phoenix in Rabbinic Literature*, in: Harvard Theological Review, 89, Cambridge, Mass., 1996, pp. 245-261.

2 F. GLIMM, trans., *The Letter of St. Clement of Rome to the Corinthians*, in: The Apostolic Fathers. Christian Heritage, 1948, pp. 30-31 (25-26). For notes on the Christian phoenix, see J. LIGHTFOOT, *S. Clement of Rome: The Two Epistles to the Corinthians*, Macmillan, 1869, pp. 94-99.

3 For background on the *Physiologus,* see especially: *Physiologus*, ed. and trans. J. CARLILL, in: *The Epic of the Beast*, George Routledge, 1924, pp. 157-183; F. McCULLOCH, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries*, University of North Carolina Press, 1960, pp. 15-27; and *Physiologus*, ed. and trans. M. CURLEY, University of Texas Press, 1979, pp. ix-xl. For the phoenix in versions of the *Physiologus,* see McCULLOCH, op. cit., pp. 158-160, and G. MERMIER, *The Phoenix: Its Nature and Its Place in the Tradition of the Physiologus*, in: Beasts and Birds of the Middle Ages: The Bestiary and Its Legacy, eds. W. CLARK and M. McMUNN, Philadelphia, Pa., 1989, pp. 69-78.

4 McCULLOCH, op. cit., p. 19.

5 See VAN DEN BROEK, op. cit., p. 147 n. 1.

6 For the decomposition and fire traditions of the death of the phoenix, see VAN DEN BROEK, op. cit., pp. 146-161.

7 Ibid., pp. 160, 214-216.

8 The most influential Early Christian phoenix writing outside the mainstream of the Latin church was *De ave phoenice,* attributed to the Church Father, Lactantius. The elaborate poem, presented within a pagan context, inspired the *Phoenix* of Claudian and the Old English *Phoenix.* Gregory of Tours included a synopsis of the *Ave* in his *Seven Wonders,* in which he places the phoenix third in his list of the wonders made by God. For Lactantius, see FITZPATRICK, op. cit.

9 *De excessu Satyri* (2.59).

10 *Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel, Fathers of the Church*, trans. J. SAVAGE, 1961, pp. 219-220 (23.79-80).

11 S. BARNEY et al., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 265 (12.7.22).

12 VAN DEN BROEK, op. cit., p. 205. This is the action of the phoenix represented in many Renaissance emblem books and printers' marks.

13 Ibid., pp. 238-245. The standard study of the *benu* and its relationship to the Western phoenix is R.T. CLARK, *The Origin of the Phoenix: A Study in Egyptian Religious Symbolism*, in: University of Birmingham Historical Journal, Birmingham, 2.1, 1949, pp. 12-29; and 2.2, 1950, pp. 105-140.

14 See the section on Greco-Roman and Early Christian art in Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae, vol. 8.1. Artemis Verlag, 1997, pp. 987-90. Nearly all the art listed cites VAN DEN BROEK as a source.

15 VAN DEN BROEK, op. cit., pp. 105-106, 245-251, 427-443, and plates 6-8. See also J. POESCH, *The Phoenix Portrayed*, in: The D.H. Lawrence Review, n.5, pp. 200-201, figs. 1a and b, and 2a and b.

16 For the phoenix in Early Christian art, see: VAN DEN BROEK, op. cit., p. 425, 442-457; FITZPATRICK, op. cit., pp. 29-30; McDONALD, op. cit., pp. 205-206; POESCH, op. cit., pp. 201-202; and L. CHARBONNEAU-LASSAY, *The Bestiary of Christ*, Parabola Books, 1991, pp. 446-448.

17 VAN DEN BROEK, op. cit., p. 442, plate 12. See this volume for numerous other examples of similar Early Christian phoenix figures.

18 Ibid., p. 446, plate 21.

19 Ibid., frontispiece, p. 425.

20 See POESCH, op. cit., p. 202, fig. 5.

21 In Ovid, Pliny, Lactantius, and in On the Resurrection of the Flesh (13), in which Tertullian controversially translates the Vulgate's Psalms 92:12 as, "The righteous shall flourish like the phoenix," rather than like the palm tree. The Vulgate offers a similar translation for the only other verse cited as scriptural proof of the phoenix: Job 29:18, which several rabbinical commentators translate as, "I shall die in my nest and shall multiply my days as the phoenix." See McDONALD, op. cit., p. 191.

22 VAN DEN BROEK, op. cit., pp. 448-449,

23 Ibid., p. 449-450, plates 24 and 25.1 and 2.

24 Ibid., p. 451-452, plates 29.2 and 30.1 and 2. See also POESCH, op. cit., p. 201, figs. 3 and 4.

25 The standard study of bestiaries is F. McCULLOCH, op. cit. A major analysis of the bestiary phoenix is the Born Again: The Phoenix chapter in D. HASSIG, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology*. Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 72-83, with eleven figures. Other treatments of the bestiary phoenix include MERMIER, op. cit., pp. 69-95, and V. JONES, *The Phoenix and Resurrection*, in: The Mark of the Beast: The Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life, and Literature, ed. D. HASSIG, Garland Publishing, 1999, pp. 99-110, with seven figures. For bestiary illustrations in general, see McCULLOCH, op. cit., pp. 70-77.

26 The eagle, which renews its youth in a fountain, is a close symbolic relative of the phoenix in the *Physiologus* and bestiaries.

27 Notably MS Royal 12.C.xix, f.49v. For this and two other phoenix figures, see A. PAYNE, *Medieval Beasts*. The British Library, 1990, pp. 70-71.

28 See HASSIG, op. cit., pp. 74-78.

29 *The Bestiary: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century*, ed. and trans., T.H. WHITE, Putnam's, 1954, pp. 125-128.

30 HASSIG, op. cit., p. 73. For a list of bestiary phoenix entries containing excerpts of these writings, see p. 223 n. 13.

31 Ibid., p. 78. See p. 225 n. 28 for a list of such manuscripts.

32 See R. BARBER, *Bestiary*. Boydell Press, 1999, p. 12.

33 *Of the phoenix,* in: the Aberdeen Bestiary, Folios 55 and 56, http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/bestiary.hti. The Aberdeen Group includes the similar Ashmole 1511, Harley 4751, and Bodley 764 bestiaries. See *The Medieval Book of Birds: Hugh of Fouilloy's Aviarium. Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies*, ed. and trans. W. CLARK, 1992, pp. 73-75.

34 CLARK, op. cit., p. 231-235. The five-hundred-year lifespan of the phoenix is so generally known that Hugh amusingly attributes its source to Scripture, p. 233 n. 3.

35 HASSIG, op. cit., p. 75, and JONES, op. cit., pp. 107-108. See both authors for symbolic interpretations of phoenix illustrations in the bestiaries, especially pp. 74-77 and 106-108, respectively.

36 JONES, op. cit., p. 107.

37 HASSIG, op. cit., p. 75.

38 Lawrence's phoenix sketch in a letter of Jan. 3, 1915, matches the Ashmole 1511 figure in the book he was reading at the time. See *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence,* vol. 2, eds. G. ZYTARUK and J. BOULTON, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 253 n. 4, and MRS. H. JENNER, *Christian Symbolism*, McClurg, 1910, facing p. 150, respectively.

Joseph Nigg

Preobrazba feniksa: od crkvenih otaca do bestijarija

Od svih životinja koje su rani i srednjovjekovni kršćani odabrali za svoje poučne simbole, mitski je feniks preuzeo najvažniju ulogu, simbolizirajući Uskrsnuće, temeljni pojam kršćanske doktrine. Čudesna je ptica, koja se ponovno rađa iz vlastita pepela, imala simboličnu važnost i prije no što su crkveni oci njenom pričom dokazali Uskrsnuće. Postupni je razvoj feniksa u kršćanskoj umjetnosti i književnosti zamršen. Dok je tijelo ranokršćanskog feniksa proizišlo iz dviju tradicija, slika je ptice nastala iz klasičnog modela nevezanog za tekst. Tek bestijariji 12. i 13. stoljeća, koji su kopirali ranije tekstove, počinju stvarati prikaz feniksa kakav danas poznajemo.

Feniks ulazi u kršćansku dogmu tekstom *Pisma Korinćanima* svetog Klementa iz Rima (oko 96. godine poslije Krista), koji predstavlja svojevrstan prijekor upućen buntovnim laicima. Klement naivno navodi kako u predjelima Arabije «postoji ptica koja se naziva feniks». Svakih 500 godina ptica umire i propada u gnijezdu začina; iz gnijezda izađe crv koji izrasta u ptića i nosi kosti svog roditelja u Egipat, tj. u Heliopol, gdje se nalazi hram Sunca. Klement svoje poglavlje dovršava preispitivanjem svih koji ne vjeruju u Božje obećanje uskrsnuća, kad to on sam dokazuje «običnom pticom». Papina je propovijed prilagođena kompilacija sastavljena od feniksovih odlika, koju možemo pronaći u tekstovima od Plinija Starijeg i Ovidija do Herodotovih utjecajnih opisa zapadnjačkog feniksa iz 5. stoljeća. Nedugo nakon što se Klementovo djelo proširilo, grčki *Physiologus*, uzor kasnijih bestijarija, mijenja feniksove odlike i navodi kako je feniks indijska ptica koja umire u plamenu gnijezdu i uskrsuje tri dana kasnije poput Isusa. Mnoge inačice *Physiologusa* i drugih djela na koja je utjecao poistovjećuju pticu s Kristovim Uskrsnućem, uključujući i ponovno rođenje nakon tri dana. Također, smrt u vatri značajno je drugačiji motiv od zastarjelih tradicija koje prihvaća Klement. Tertulijan, sveti Ambrozije, mnogi crkveni oci te kasniji tvorci bestijarija duguju svoje prikaze jednoj ili objema kršćanskim alegorijama. Jedini pisani autoritet jest Tertulijanov krivi prijevod 12. retka 92. psalma, gdje piše kako će «pravednici napredovati poput feniksa», dok židovski komentatori Knjigu o Jobu (92. poglavlje, 12. redak) čitaju: «umrijet ću u svom gnijezdu i oplemeniti svoje dane poput feniksa».

Ranokršćanski prikaz feniksa vuče korijene iz antičkih izvora, ali se ne poklapa s opisima Herodota i ostalih grčko–rimskih autora. Grčki je povjesničar utemeljio svoj opis na priči koju su mu, o ptici *benu,* nalik na čaplju, ispričali svećenici u heliopolskom hramu, iako su prikazi - koje je vidio i koje je nazivao «feniks» - prikazivali drugačiju vrstu ptice, nalik na orla. Izvor osnovne priče o fekiksu u Heliopolu i rimsko zauzimanje Egipta doveli su do sinkretizacije egipatske ptice *benu* u dugonogog, okretnog feniksa, koji se nalazio na reversima carskih novčića, od vladavine Hadrijana pa sve do konstantinske dinastije. U međuvremenu su, u Priscillinim i ostalim katakombama, progonjeni Kršćani slikali ili urezivali najranije primjere ove ptice: figuru s aureolom koja umire u vatrama žrtvovanja i mučeništva u trenutku prije samog uskrnuća, što je nalikovalo rimskim prikazima. Drugačiji motiv feniksa nalazio se na reljefima sarkofaga i u apsidalnim mozaicima, poput onoga rimske crkve Svetih Kuzme i Damjana. U sceni prepoznatoj kao *Traditio legis*, uskrsla ptica sjedi na palmi datulje s desna uskrslom Kristu, svecima i apostolima u raju. Feniks i plodno palmino stablo zbog svoje su se grčke istoznačnosti još od početka prikazivanja blisko povezivali.

Klasični su uzori u *Etimologijama* svetoga Izidora, seviljskoga biskupa (5. stoljeće), pomogli u proširenju *Physiologusa* u ono što će postati bestijariji kasnijeg srednjeg vijeka. U slučaju feniksa pisci često povezuju Izidorovu etimologiju s parafrazama iz *Physiologusa* i Ambrozijeva *Hexamerona*. Takvi su tekstovi nastali iz različitih tradicija o feniksu, podržanih od crkvenih otaca i *Physiologusa* te, kako se čini, bez zanimanja pisara za moguće nedosljednosti među izvorima. Te su stranice utjecale na ikonografiju feniksa. Do 12. je stoljeća rimska i ranokršćanska aureola nestala, dok su se noge u minijaturama bestijarija skratile. Ptica se najčešće prikazuje u nizu narativnih parova slika kako skuplja začine za lomaču te umire, tj. ponovno se rađa u plamenu, s krilima raširenim u položaj raspeća ili uzašašća. Najčešći se prikaz feniksa razvio u u renesansnoj heraldici, alkemiji, amblemima knjiga i vodenim žigovima te, naposljetku, u modernim insignijama i dizajnu, koji najčešće simboliziraju obnovu nakon uništenja. Poznati je amblem pisca D.H. Lawrenca iz 20. stoljeća nastao po uzoru na minijature bestijarija Ashmole.

Prijevod s engleskoga: Virna Car

Primljeno/Received: 25.11.2008.
Izvorni znanstveni rad